

# House, Senate remap plans shuffle districts

## Acadiana lawmakers split over shifts

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**BATON ROUGE** — The House and Senate are scheduled to vote this week on plans that would reshape existing election districts and create new ones.

Many legislators don't like it because it forces them to surren-

der some current constituents and face voters they have never had to court. Also, the prospect of new challengers looms.

"It's never easy," said state Rep. Rick Gallot, chairman of the House and Governmental Affairs Committee, which helped shape House Bill 1, the House plan presented by Speaker of the House Jim Tucker, R-Terrytown.

But the every-decade redistricting process is even more complicated this year by the major population shift spawned by hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

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## Shuffle

Some districts in New Orleans, where the population loss was worst, have to be dissolved, which forces incumbents to run against each other or surrender and give up their seats at the end of this term.

State Rep. Nancy Landry, R-Lafayette, said the Acadiana delegation welcomes a new Acadiana minority district.

"We're happy to have another voice," she said.

Lafayette Parish's black population grew 25 percent in the past 10 years. However, because the new residents were spread throughout the parish, there was not a way to draw a cohesive district without taking in other parishes, Landry said.

The district is based in Iberia and St. Martin parishes and takes in part of Lafayette Parish, including downtown Lafayette.

The growth in Lafayette forced districts to shrink, so lawmakers from other parishes have parts of Lafayette Parish.

With the new district, eight House members will represent at least parts of Lafayette Parish, geographically one of the smallest parishes in the state.

"It's about population, not geography," Landry said.

State Sen. Elbert Lee Guillory, D-Opelousas, disapproves of how the plan splits St. Landry Parish into four districts.

He has proposed his own plan, backed by Louisiana Family Forum, that barely has two senators in the parish.

It gives him all but seven precincts in St. Landry Parish and a bit of Lafayette Parish.

The plan is scheduled for a hearing within the next week.

In central and northwestern Louisiana, lost population would force two Alexandria-area House incumbents into a consolidated district.

The new plans call for

three new minority districts in the House and two in the Senate.

Initially, the House plan presented in committee had two minority districts, which Tucker said were needed to avoid "retrogression" — decreasing minority opportunity to elect a representative. The districts were in Acadiana and the Florida Parishes area east of Baton Rouge.

But a majority of the committee agreed with Gallot that since the numbers were there for a fourth minority district in Shreveport, it should be created to avoid a challenge from the U.S. Justice Department, which reviews election changes to see if they comply with the Voting Rights Act.

State Rep. Barbara Norton of Shreveport fought the creation of the new district because she was concerned that it would decrease the minority percentage in her own Democratic district.

After the Shreveport issue was settled, the major arguments in the House bill focused on Alexandria and Monroe.

Democrats Chris Roy of Alexandria and James Armes question how in a region filled with Republicans they find themselves being thrown into a district running against each other. In a draft, Roy was supposed to, run against state Rep. Rick Nowlin, R-Natchitoches, but Tucker shifted the plan to have the two Democrats run against each other before he presented it to the committee.

The Rapides delegation plans to try to alter the plan on the House floor.

"It ought not to be about Democrat and Republican," said state Rep. Herbert Dixon, D-Alexandria.

Mayors Jacques Roy of Alexandria and Clarence Fields of Pineville asked the committee to alter the plan because of the way it splits Rapides Parish but their request was rejected.

About 32 percent of Louisiana's population is black but demographers and legislators say there's no way to legitimately shape one-third of the 105 House districts and one-

third of the 39 Senate seats so minorities could have a reasonable expectation of being elected.

In the Senate bill, Senate Bill 1, Senate President Joel Chaisson, D-Destrehan, calls for two minority districts — one in the River Parishes region and one that starts in Rapides Parish and runs up to take in the Grambling area of Lincoln Parish and Natchitoches.

Democratic State Sens. Joe McPherson of Woodworth and Rob Marionneaux of Livonia introduced bills to create only one black district, the number needed to replace a lost district in New Orleans and avoid retrogression.

But Chaisson said that since another minority district could be created, it should so the plan would be approved.

McPherson said he's afraid that instead of gaining Justice Department approval, Chaisson's extra district could have the opposite effect.

"It's racial gerrymandering, which the Supreme Court has said is improper," said McPherson, who is term-limited and can't run for re-election in District 29.

The plan destroys the current Senate District 29," he said. "It brings a fourth senator into Rapides Parish."

Mayors Roy and Fields object to SB1 because it splits Rapides Parish — including the two cities — into separate districts and possibly separates them from the England Air Park.

They said they did not oppose creation of a minority district in the region, just how Chaisson's bill does it.

Roy, who is white, was elected in a city that has a majority of black residents. Fields, who is black, has been repeatedly been re-elected in a majority white city.

McPherson said that if the bill passes, he believes he Alexandria community will challenge it in court and "probably some other communities will join us."

In Lafayette, where Chaisson says state Sen.

Mike Michot has "the most compact district in the state, the population growth forced districts to shrink."

"I have to shed 23,000 people in my district," said Michot, whose district contains the largest residential areas of the city. It has no agricultural land or industrial development.

But Michot is not eligible to run in the new district. He said this is his "last hoorah" because of term limits.

Because the district is shrinking, newly elected Republican state Sens. Fred Mills of Parks, and Jonathan Perry of Kaplan, move more into Lafayette Parish.

State Sen. Lydia Jackson, D-Shreveport, opposes SB1.

"There are too many political considerations in drawing the districts," she said.

Chaisson repeatedly said his lines were based on protecting incumbents, which is one of several principles in redistricting.

"This is not about who we elect," Jackson said. "This is about the people who elect."

In the Monroe area,

state Sen. Mike Walsworth, R-West Monroe, supported SB1.

The only controversy was former state Rep. Willie Hunter, former Monroe School Board member Brenda Shelling, Free Press Publisher Roosevelt Wright Jr. and Monroe resident Ceasar Smith contesting the way

the bill selected population to fill a 13,000 voter loss in the area's minority senatorial district.

They said the places selected strengthen the base of the current senator, Democrat Francis Thompson of Delhi, who is white.

The district remains 67 percent black.